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SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, APRIL 26-MAY 2, 2008

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11. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

12. (U) ANNUAL FREEDOM HOUSE RESULTS: Albania scored a mid-range 50 (on a scale of 0-100) from Freedom House in its annual evaluation of press freedom across the world, placing it 105 of 195 countries evaluated, strongly in the Partly Free category. The score is based on estimations of the legal, political and economic media environments country-by-country. The report notes that Prime Minister Berisha exercised selective pressure on opposition-oriented media throughout the year, and accuses unidentified outlets of receiving funding from organized crime groups. On a positive note, the report says that the broadcast media curbed much of their usual bias to provide balanced coverage ahead of local elections in February 2007.

13. (U) The survey rates Albania as less free than its regional neighbors, and is on par with last year's evaluation and that of local international embassies and organizations. Freedom House reports that the media continued to reflect a diversity of viewpoints in 2007, though key outlets tended to support one political faction or another and journalists practiced self-censorship to support the political or economic interests of their employers. While the media is free, is it largely political and driven by economic interests rather than the heady goal of "All the News That's Fit to Print."

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

14. (U) WHEN GOOD TENDERS GO BAD: Last month the Ministry of Interior (MOI) announced a tender for automatic digital radars for Albanian traffic police. This initiative was applauded by everyone who battles Tirana's chaotic traffic, characterized by generally bad driving habits and a high accident rate. The police need such equipment to effectively nab the worst offenders, however, to the surprise of interested companies, the tender's specifications coincided exactly with a specific project manufactured by only one company, and interestingly, exclude the most advanced technology in the field, laser technology.

15. (U) Noting these problems, one bidder in particular sent a formal letter of inquiry to the MOI, and when initial concerns weren't addressed, followed up with a letter of complaint, highlighting the advantages of the newest technology and emphasizing that procurement procedures should offer a fair playing field for

all competitors. So far, the Ministry has not addressed these major concerns. This is not the first time the GOA has apparently taken the specifications for a tender verbatim from a product description, the most infamous case being the high profile tender for national identification cards, which was ultimately unsatisfactory to bidders even after the GOA released a revised set of specifications. Embassy Tirana will continue to follow the radar case to advocate for equal opportunity for interested American companies.

THIS WEEK IN ARTS AND CULTURE

¶6. (U) ORTHODOX EASTER IN ALBANIA: Orthodox Easter is a curiosity for some non-Orthodox Christians, as it seems to be the same celebration, different day. The Orthodox use of the Gregorian calendar is at the root of this difference, while the rituals marking the event are largely similar. In Tirana last weekend, Orthodox Christians began to gather at their churches before the midnight hour, and en masse, proceeded on foot to the nearby headquarters of the Orthodox Church. Here the Archbishop greeted them in the courtyard with a holy fire, a light traditionally taken from candles at the tomb of Christ, and the hundreds present lit their own candles from this symbolic light. Children carried hard boiled eggs painted red (symbolic of blood), smashing theirs against those of friends and family, in search of the egg that could survive uncracked. (A few do, and these are kept in a place of honor throughout the year until the next Easter. Some kids reportedly try to slip in wooden eggs to beat the odds, which prove infallible until a parent investigates beyond the red paint.) With candles still lit, everyone returned home in the early hours of the morning, lighting the streets as they went, and rising late on Easter for a traditional lunch of lamb with friends and family.

¶7. (U) MAY DAY CELEBRATIONS: May Day, a celebration of the common worker that takes place in many parts of the world, is no longer

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celebrated in Albania with the proletariat fervor of the communist era. However, the day was marked this year by many Albanian families with a traditional outdoor picnic, while the government hosted popular concerts and events in Tirana's Mother Theresa Square.

¶8. (U) EUROPEAN WEEK: Today through next Friday the European Commission will host a series of events across Albania to enhance cultural diversity in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008). These activities are supported in the spirit of EU integration, a goal to which the country is moving closer. Activities include a wide span of cultural genres such as films and documentaries, photo and painting exhibitions, middle and high school essay competitions about the EU, and classical and modern concerts organized by EU member embassies. These activities aim to provide a current snapshot of the shifting dynamics of the many cultures that comprise the EU, as well as to highlight recent cultural and social developments of Albanian society.

THE WEEK AHEAD

¶9. (U) Parliament will likely vote on the Prosecutor General's request to lift parliamentary immunity for former Defense Minister Fatmir Mediu. The PG announced last Friday that Mediu was being investigated on up to 20 charges of corruption and abuse of power related to the Gerdec tragedy. Ambassador Withers will speak at Tirana University on corruption in Albanian society at an event to release the results of an annual USAID-funded report on this subject.

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